In her peaceful garden next to the river, a woman is hard at work. Seated on a wooden bench, her hands move with incredible speed and suppleness, twisting and turning. It's impossible to see exactly how it happens, but gradually a length of coir rope emerges, fashioned by her fast moving hands.

Words Chiranthi Rajapakse Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

Coir is the natural fibre extracted from the husk of the coconut shell. Put that way it sounds complicated but if you live in Sri Lanka the chances are that you use a coir product almost every day. Coir shows up in the most diverse range of products, from ropes to doormats, brushes and mattresses.

"People find it difficult to believe that we soak it for so long but otherwise it's difficult to extract the fibre by hand"

Processing the coconut husk to obtain coir is carried out in several stages. In some areas the task of extracting the coir has been taken over by mechanised coir mills, but traditionally it was done by hand as a cottage industry. One such place where the skill of processing coir by hand flourishes is at the home of Anusha Silva and her family. Anusha, her mother and sister run a small cottage industry, extracting coir from coconut husks and using the fibre to spin coir ropes.

Their 'workplace' is their garden. Walking across the grassy lawn sloping down towards the river, Anusha shows us how the work is carried out. Coconut trees are plentiful in the area and the family buys coconut husks from neighbouring gardens. The fibrous husks are

separated from the hard coconut shell and soaked in the river for a period of a year. While soaking, microorganisms break down the tissues surrounding the fibres, thus loosening the fibres. "People find it difficult to believe that we soak it for so long but otherwise it's difficult to extract the fibre by hand" says Anusha.

After this the husks are beaten by hand to separate out the individual fibres. Anusha demonstrates how this is done. It's not an easy job; each husk is kept on a wooden log and pounded with a stone rod, a task that requires considerable energy.

After the fibres are separated, they are spun to make ropes. This is where the family uses two interesting methods, the ropes are spun either by hand or using a simple device constructed out of an old bicycle wheel. Winding the rope by hand is a fine skill; we watch

as Anusha's mother twists two lengths of coir fibre between her palms to produce a coir rope. Her hands move so quickly it's impossible to make out the individual movements and watching the rope emerge is rather like watching a magic trick being performed.

The other method is to use a simple device, made from adapting an old bicycle wheel. The two strands of coir are fed into the wooden device and the handle is turned by hand to wind the rope. "Rope spun by hand is stronger though it takes more time to make," says Anusha, adding that one person can twist up to 200 metres of rope a day.

Large scale manufacturers use machines to twist coir rope, the cottage industry still relies on the hand spin method and the simple device made of a bycicle wheel to produce rope.

The family sells the rope thus made, mainly to fishermen in the area. Coir fibre is said to be relatively waterproof and one of the few natural fibres relatively resistant to salt water. Since they have been in the business for a long time, the family is well known and they have no difficulty in finding buyers. Their garden also has a small hut where products made using coir are displayed for sale. Brightly coloured coir mats made by neighbouring craftsmen are also displayed along with ornaments and brooms.

Whereas large scale manufacturers use machines to twist coir rope, the cottage industry still relies on the hand spin method and the simple device made of a bicycle wheel to produce rope. The cottage industry seems to be dominated by women. "*Gehanu vitharai karanney*" (only the women do it), Anusha tells us. She shrugs her shoulders and smiles when we ask why this is so. Watching her family is an example of this, their garden hosts three generations of women; Anusha, her sister, and their mother work together while Anusha's little daughter runs about the garden. Their home and their workplace is one; perhaps that is the secret of their success. And in a world that is becoming increasingly industrialised it's encouraging to see that some skills are still being preserved and handed on.

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